

Editorial: Young children and art education

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Authors	Adams, Jeff;Atherton, Frances
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Editorial: Young Children and Art Education

Jeff Adams and Frances Atherton

This special issue of *iJADE* is devoted to the art education of young children, and provides a timely platform for the dissemination of new research in this important area. For many young children their artistic experiences can prove to be some of the most profound and insightful of their early education. Although these creative moments are frequently integrated with a multitude of other educational experiences, nonetheless the artistic ones have a singularity, making them unique within the educational experience as a whole. It is the predominance of a visual epistemology that provides this specificity, and it hardly needs stating that knowing by means of the visual is of profound importance in our contemporary societies. The demonstration and the parole of this 'knowing' by young children should not be seen as peripheral, or as an adjunct to education. Fundamental to a well-informed art education are the critical expression of meaning and purpose, no matter how tentative these might appear. These practices entail a critical engagement with the languages of visual imagery, to which children readily adapt. As Thompson (2008) argues, providing a platform for children's 'voice' when making judgements about their work and their artistic production is an essential component of the pedagogy of education through art, and by extension for children's education as a whole. The advent of the neoliberal fetishisation of measurement and calibration in order to facilitate competition, which increasingly dominates – and corrodes – educational practices worldwide, combined with the inherent difficulties of corralling the arts into easily measurable outcomes, is one of the main reasons for their marginalisation in some national curricula and state policies. In recent years, however, there has been a developing international research interest in artistic modes of expression as a source of knowledge, in and of itself, providing additional space where young children may generate meaning and express thought (Binder & Kotsopoulos 2011; McClure et al. 2017; Lopatovska et al. 2016). Educators and policymakers have been urged to refocus attention on the possibilities of artistic experiences in the lives of young children, since to relegate them to a peripheral, seemingly inconsequential place, overlooks the potential of the arts for nourishing and supporting young children's creative voice: Children's images reveal the colour of personal expression, the lines of their experience, the shapes of their thought, the textures of their imaginations, the forms of their being, the patterns of their learning, the inner and outer spaces of their worlds, and the contrasting elements between the real world and the imagination. (Binder 2011, 377) There is no restriction in Binder's observations to the conventional associations which artistic experiences may suggest for young children: a predictable portrayal of value is rejected and a much more open mode of representation proposed. Dissanayake (2001, 336) proposes that infants are born with 'aesthetic incunabula', an inbuilt sensitivity to the emotional effects of the arts and suggests that there is an instinctive predisposition for aesthetic engagement. As many art educators will testify, the possibilities of artistic experience are vast and significant, and provide a gateway to the extraordinary. In this context, Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2009, 132) assert that 'the arts are foundational constituents of early schooling'. They are convinced of the stifling nature of a limited curriculum and warn against underestimating the potential of human proficiencies and cultural life. The capacity of young children's thinking and their powerful ability to learn is well documented (Selleck 2001; Atherton & Nutbrown 2013), but if the arts are considered as an inconvenient extra to be squeezed into a curriculum bulging with seemingly more 'important' subjects, then the opportunities which artistic experiences offer may seem unattainable except for the emboldened, committed few. All too frequently teachers have to resort to 'enrichment time', when the arts are retrieved and momentarily have their place, only to be consigned to a subsidiary existence where the notion of a cultivated aestheticism may be curtailed. Art education undoubtedly engenders rich learning opportunities, which are endorsed by national curricula, such as the one currently in use in England for the youngest children which stipulates that children be encouraged 'to explore and play with a wide range of media and share their thoughts, ideas and feelings through a variety of activities in art, music, movement, dance, role-play, and design and technology' (DfE 2017, 8–9). Artistic experiences are the creative foundation for life; in the home, in families, with friends, in communities, in early childhood settings, with the people they encounter, and in times spent alone where children may glimpse other worlds through the arts. The beautiful, the provocative, the disquieting, the astonishing, the impossible, the intriguing, the surprising, the poignant, the ordinary: for each of these arts in education have a vital significance in children's holistic development.

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